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ABSTRACT

Members of the local community should be aware of public access channels on cable television systems, yet large segments of the public are unaware that they exist. To determine how the medium was perceived in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area, a study surveyed 226 individuals by telephone, asking if they were aware of public or community access on cable. For respondents who answered negatively, public access was defined as the opportunity for people to produce and show their own programs on cable television, because public access television has many synonyms in practice. Results of the awareness poll indicated that cable subscribers were significantly more likely to express awareness than non-subscribers, and those who lived in areas served by older cable systems or were more educated were even more likely to be aware. After learning of it through mass media information, flipping channels was the most common way people became aware of public access. Respondents were polled for words they associated with public access, then a knowledge instrument was constructed from "true" statements about public access (such as "open to anyone" and "free speech"). Those with more knowledge of public access cable were more likely to agree with the statements, and those with low knowledge were more neutral. (SKC)

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PERCEPTIONS OF CABLE PUBLIC ACCESS

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INTRODUCTION

Approximately one-third of the cable systems serving the top fifty markets have at least one channel dedicated to public access (Moss & Warren, 1984, p. 250). Although there is a great deal of variation in the operations and procedures pertaining to the access channels, most provide channel time to individuals and organizations within the systems's franchise area with little or no cost and with virtually no restrictions regarding program content so long as it is non-commercial and does not violate laws.

RATIONALE FOR PUBLIC ACCESS TELEVISION

Community leaders, people who work in public access, and scholars have agreed on several important purposes for access television. Ralph Lee Smith (1974) has referred to public access as "the true soapbox," (p. 429) and others have suggested it is an important means of expression and participation in the dialogue of a democracy (Clemens, 1980-1981); Alderson, 1981; Katz, 1985; Milwaukee Metro Chapter of the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers [NFLCP], 1985). Another purpose is related to the potential variety of programming. Cable access is virtually independent of the economic marketplace and therefore Mitropolous (1983) considers the diversity of programs aimed at numerous small audiences through public access channels a reflection of the pluralistic tradition in the United States. Smith (1974) and Buske (1980) also view this "narrowcasting" as a desirable goal of access. Clearly the most frequently cited purpose of public access television is to focus upon the local community (Smith, 1974; Augenthie, et.al., 1976; Clemens, 1980-1981; Joffe, 1981; Moss & Warren, 1984; NFLCP, 1985; Milwaukee Access Telecommunications Authority [MATA], 1986).

PROGRAMMING

Anecdotal evidence suggests the programs on public access do offer a wide assortment of topics and formats. There are political and civic programs (Bruce, 1976; Boyle, 1980; Clemens, 1980-1981; Smith, 1981a, 1981b; Joffe, 1981), news and documentary programs (Topper & Wilson, 1976; Landro, 1982; Smith, 1981a), programs for children which are sometimes produced by children (Smith, 1981a; Landro, 1982; Katz, 1985), crafts, how-to, and educational programs (Bruce, 1976; Boyle, 1980; Clemens, 1980-1981; Landro, 1982; MATA, 1986), programs dealing with religion and values (Kowet, 1980; Clemens, 1980-1981; Joffe, 1981; Katz, 1985; MATA, 1986), health programs (Clemens, 1980-1981), dramas (Clemens, 1980-1981; Smith, 1981a), arts programs (Clemens, 1980-1981; Smith, 1981a; Landro, 1982; Katz, 1985; MATA, 1986), programs aimed at ethnic groups (Smith, 1981a; Landro, 1982), and even some programs which some people consider pornographic (Kowet, 1980; Landro, 1982).

PRODUCERS AND QUALITY

The producers who typically come from the local community have been variously described as highly motivated and trained for what they do on the one hand (Katz, 1985) or as merely engaging in the electronic version of vanity press on the other (Kowet, 1980; Whitney, 1980).

The quality of the programs has also been greeted with mixed reviews. Some programs are said to be slick and spontaneous ("People's TV" is here," 1982), while others are described as wacky (Kowet, 1980). Some programs are credited for their variety ("People's TV" is here," 1982; Alderson, 1981; Katz, 1985). Others are perceived as dull (Smith, 1974; Bruce, 1976; Landro, 1982).

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

Ten years ago, Douglas Bruce (1976) wrote, "The idea of access is new and nobody knows what it is yet." (p. 50) While today, some can describe the concept of public access and the programs which it provides, it nevertheless remains unclear if the public knows what it is. According to Kathleen T. Schuler, executive director of the Foundation for Community Service Cable Television, "the most dominant factor affecting the development of public access is the lack of awareness and understanding of the medium by the general community and by the major potential user organizations." Yet, she knows of no studies relating to public awareness or perceptions of public access television (Personal Communication, May 27, 1986).

Because the ideal of access is to have community members using it as a means of expression, serving the community's many special interests, it is important to know the extent of public awareness of access and how the medium is perceived by the community. This study examines the Milwaukee metropolitan area in which the suburbs are served by cable systems which have been fully operational for years and in which the city of Milwaukee's cable system is new. The study explores the awareness of and attitudes toward public access television.

METHOD

A telephone survey of 226 respondents from the Milwaukee metropolitan area was conducted in April of 1986. Subjects were randomly selected from the telephone directory, with the last digit of each number selected reduced by one digit to assure reaching unlisted telephone households. Of the original sample of 585 telephone numbers called, 226 were completed interviews, 86 were refusals or

prematurely terminated interviews, and the remainder were either ineligible, such as businesses, no adults home, unable to communicate in English, or consistently busy signals or no answers. Up to three call-backs over the three-day period were made for each number in the sample. Respondents ranged in age from 14 to 87 years, with a median age of 37.5 years. The sample was evenly split between men and women (48% and 50%).

The four county SMSA of metropolitan Milwaukee is the 28th largest metro area in the United States. The city of Milwaukee accounts for slightly over one-half of the total population of 1,396,767. Milwaukee is the nation's 16th largest city (Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, 1983).

Seven cable systems serve Milwaukee County. Of them, the city system is newly constructed and is identified in this study as a new system. All others have been in operation for at least five years, and are identified as mature systems. Approximately one-fourth of the respondents were city residents and served by the new system.

A ten-minute interview was conducted, eliciting age, sex, community of residence, subscription to cable television, and awareness of and attitudes toward public access. Within the interview, forty-five descriptors of public access were given, with respondents indicating their degree of agreement on a five-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."

Data were coded and analyzed using the SPSSx program. Tests included crosstabulation with Chi Square and appropriate Eta measures, T-Tests, and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients. An alpha level of $p .05$ was selected for this study. More specific descriptions of methods are recounted in the results.

RESULTS

AWARENESS OF PUBLIC ACCESS

In examining awareness of public access, respondents were asked if they were aware of "public or community access on cable." For those who answered that they were not aware of it, an aided recall question was asked: "Public access is the opportunity for people to produce and show their own programs on cable television. Have you ever heard of that?" Because public access has been variously defined in practice (e.g. "community access," "cable access," "community programming"), the aided recall question contributes to a more accurate estimate of the actual awareness of public access. A combined response of awareness yielded 117 respondents or a 51.8% awareness level.

Awareness was compared across a number of dimensions of the audience, including awareness in the mature systems compared to awareness in the city of Milwaukee, served by a new system. Other variables included subscription to cable television, age, education, and sex.

Cable subscribers were significantly more likely to express awareness than non-subscribers (62.1% and 43.1% respectively, $X^2=7.4$, $p<.01$). Respondents who lived in areas served by the more mature cable systems were significantly more aware than those living in the area served by the new city system (64.2% vs. 35.8%, $X^2=6.9$, $p<.01$). Those with higher education were significantly more likely to know about access ($X^2=14.8$, $p<.01$). Neither age nor gender was found to be significantly related to awareness.

FREQUENCY OF VIEWERSHIP

Respondents aware of public access were asked how often they watched the programming. The majority (64.4%) said they never watch it, with another 10.9% rarely watching it. About 16% watch it "occasionally," while about 7% watch it at least weekly. As expected, viewership of public access was low. In crosstabulations, there was no significant difference between respondents from mature system areas and new system areas in frequency of viewership.

HOW PEOPLE BECOME AWARE OF PUBLIC ACCESS

When respondents aware of public access were asked how they learned about public access, the most frequent response was mass media (27.8%), followed by flipping through channels and happening upon public access (21.7%). Interpersonal communications ranked third (18.3%) and prior exposure was the fourth-most indicated means of awareness (10.4%). Brochures, the cable electronic bulletin board, and actual participation in public access each yielded less than ten percent of the responses.

As expected, awareness through mass media was stronger for respondents in the newer cable system than in the mature systems, while respondents in the mature systems had greater exposure through flipping channels on the cable.

Likewise, cable subscribers acquired awareness mostly through direct exposure by flipping through the channels, followed by mass media, interpersonal means, and promotional brochures. Non-subscribers acquired awareness mostly through mass media, followed by interpersonal means and prior exposure.

In summary, awareness of cable public access is acquired through a variety of means, with both cable subscribers and people living in mature system areas discovering public access more through direct exposure than any other means. For

non-subscribers and people living in new system areas, awareness comes more from the mass media and interpersonal means.

PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC ACCESS

With relatively high respondent awareness but conversely infrequent direct exposure to public access, measures of perception explored several dimensions of public access. Two approaches to the ascertainment of public perceptions were used.

In the first approach, respondents were given an opportunity to list several words or phrases describing public access television. The open-ended answers were condensed into eight categories, plus a miscellaneous category. Most of the words or phrases that came to mind were very general, and words that suggested "public" or "people" or "individuals" occupied 23.6% of those responses. Second-ranking descriptive words reflected "local" or "community" meanings (19.8%). Next were "special interest" words, including such things as elderly interests, women's interests, or various community groups or organizations (14.2%). "Government" or "politics" captured 11.3% of the responses. "Low cost," positive and negative evaluations each accounted for less than five percent of the responses. The remainder were miscellaneous responses.

In the second approach, a list of 45 descriptive words or phrases was given to respondents aware of public access, and they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the descriptors on a five point scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to neutral (3), to strongly agree (5). The list of descriptors was generated from researcher perceptions and awareness and literature descriptions, and represented a broad range of the dimensions of public access. They were categorized into four groupings, representing general descriptions of public

access, descriptions of public access programs, the production of public access programs, and the producers of public access programs (Table 1).

(INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

In rank-order, those items that respondents aware of public access most agreed with are that public access is informational, a team effort, a good way to share ideas, and free speech. The items that they most disagreed with are that public access is obscene, only watched by program producers, a waste of time, seen by almost everyone, and flashy.

From the 45 items in the list, four were identified by the researchers as factual rather than perceptual; that is, they were considered to be true facts about public access, and not subject to perceptual interpretation. They were used to construct the "knowledge" scale described below.

PERCEPTIONS ACCORDING TO DEGREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Within the instrument, a number of questions were designed to verify awareness through the degree of accuracy of perception of some of the basic qualities of public access. From the list of 45 perceptual adjectives or phrases, a "knowledge" scale was constructed using four descriptors which were considered to be true facts about public access. The descriptors selected were that public access is "locally run," "open to anyone," "non-profit," and that public access programs are "free speech." A test of reliability showed an alpha correlation of .61 among the four items. Across all these descriptors, the mean values on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree were considered

to represent high agreement, and suggest that the sample of respondents aware of public access were indeed aware of public access. A summed mean for the scale was 15.52 with a standard deviation of 3.19. Table 1 shows the means of the knowledge scale items.

Pearson product-moment correlations show significant relationships between scores on the knowledge scale and agreement with twenty-five of the forty-one perceptual descriptors, included in Table 2. The table also reports, for illustrative purposes, group means for the highest third and lowest third on the knowledge scale. In each of the significant relationships except one (public access programs are "simple"), those with lower knowledge held more neutral opinions than those with greater knowledge. That is, when the respondents aware of public access agreed with a descriptor, those with high knowledge agreed more strongly; when the aware respondents disagreed with a descriptor, those with high knowledge disagreed more strongly. For example, as knowledge among the respondents increased, they were more likely to identify public access programs as being community centered ($r=.51$, $p<.001$) and less likely to describe the production process as too difficult to do ($r=-.27$, $p<.01$).

(INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE)

As was the case with awareness of public access, the knowledge scores were found to be higher for those respondents living in areas served by more mature cable systems ($\text{Eta}=.22$) and for those who subscribe to cable ($\text{Eta}=.18$). No correlation was found between degree of knowledge and age or level of education.

DISCUSSION

Although the study was undertaken without a precisely expected degree of awareness, it was anticipated that awareness of public access would be much lower than the findings demonstrated. Furthermore, many non-subscribers expressed an awareness, pointing to the role of mass media in informing the public. While awareness was higher than expected, viewership was low, as expected. Generally, as people subscribe to cable and as a cable system matures, people become more aware of the existence of public access.

Responses to the open-ended question soliciting descriptions of public access were general, but nevertheless touched upon most of the categories addressed by the literature, and within the list of descriptors used in the study. Without prompting, the public recognized the community-centered philosophy, the identity of the producers, and program characteristics. Absent was acknowledgment of the production process.

Based upon reactions to the descriptors, people who know of the existence of public access tend to perceive it favorably across all dimensions. For example, they consider it accessible, as the name public access implies, in that they are able to identify it as open to anyone and consider it not controlled by an elite group of people. They consider the programming varied, creative, and informative. The production process is fun and a good way to share ideas, and, while they recognize it as a lot of work, the respondents do not consider it too difficult to do. They identify a variety of types of producers from the community ranging from school and civic groups to common people. As knowledge increases, so do the generally favorable perceptions of public access television.

However, those favorable impressions do not lead many of the respondents to watch access programming. An explanation of the low viewership might be that people do not strongly perceive access as having much entertainment value. For example, they only moderately agree that the programs are entertaining and only slightly disagree that the programs are dull. Furthermore, they find the programs talkative, and the more knowledgeable respondents consider them even more so. The success of public access television need not be measured in terms of the size of its audience. Many of its proponents and designers intend it to be a "narrowcast" medium by nature, providing specialized programming for small but interested audiences (Smith, 1974; Buske, 1980; Mitropolous, 1983). On the other hand, an increased audience, or, at the very least, an increase in the awareness of what public access is, may be essential to its vitality.

Further research might investigate the relationship between perceptions of access and likelihood of viewing access programming, dispositions toward active participation in production, and comparisons of the perceptions of the producers and coordinators of public access with the perceptions of the public. For example, participants in public access might be more aware of the production process than the general public, and be inclined to define public access differently on this dimension. It would also be useful to know if those active in access have an accurate view of the perceptions of the public, those they are trying to reach with their programming. For access to work well, it ought to be reflective of the community in all its variety, and it is the responsibility of the coordinators to insure this diversity. But the coordinators may be off the mark in estimating public perceptions. Likewise, the producers might not fully understand the views of the coordinators or the public. In other words, various groups (the coordinators, the producers, and the public) may define the medium differently.

If public access survives efforts by many cable operators to be relieved of its contractual necessity, it may yet achieve Smith's vision of "the true soap box." Supporters of access may be encouraged by the findings of this study, and may find ways to improve public knowledge, use, and attitudes.

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Table 1
Perceptions of Public Access
By Aware Respondents (N=117)

	Mean	S.D.
Public access is:		
*Locally run	3.99	1.06
*Open to anyone	3.83	1.23
*Non-profit	3.74	1.32
Required by the cable company's contract	3.70	1.35
Cheap to produce programs	3.18	1.18
Controlled by the local government	2.62	1.32
Controlled by an elite group of people	2.38	1.39
Public access programs are:		
Informational	4.33	0.95
*Free Speech	4.04	1.08
Community centered	3.98	1.10
Talkative	3.86	1.11
For others to view	3.83	1.08
Variety	3.77	1.24
Self-serving	3.69	1.16
Creative	3.67	1.25
Entertaining	3.53	1.15
Controversial	3.44	1.16
The Arts	3.39	1.23
Politics	3.12	1.17
Simple	3.07	1.15
Dull	2.74	1.19
Censored	2.72	1.31
Flashy	2.23	1.08
Seen by almost everyone	2.14	1.34
A waste of time	2.04	1.27
Only watched by the program producers	2.00	1.15
Obscene	1.56	0.91
The production of public access programs is:		
A team effort	4.28	0.95
A good way to share ideas	4.27	1.01
Fun	3.74	1.16
A lot of work	3.55	1.32
A good way to make friends	3.23	1.31

An individual effort	2.92	1.39
Too difficult to do	2.27	1.12

Those who produce public access programs are:

Civic groups	3.94	1.08
School groups	3.91	1.05
People interested in art or culture	3.85	1.10
Leaders	3.82	1.11
Trained in the use of it	3.65	1.15
Artists	3.60	1.16
People interested in politics	3.49	1.17
Church Groups	3.46	1.30
Common people	3.45	1.27
Individuals	3.37	1.32
Activists	3.37	1.33

Note. Responses range from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

*Descriptors used to create the knowledge scale.

Table 2
Perceptions of Public Access
Comparing High Awareness and Low Awareness

Comparing High Awareness and Low Awareness					
DESCRIPTIVE PHRASES	HIGH AWARENESS (N=26)		LOW AWARENESS (N=34)		CORRELATION(N=)
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Public access is:					
Required by the cable company's contract	3.75	(1.46)	3.46	(1.27)	.05 (98)
Cheap to produce programs	3.21	(1.14)	2.73	(1.04)	.15 (99)
Controlled by the local government	2.47	(1.48)	2.65	(1.29)	-.09 (100)
Controlled by an elite group of people	1.97	(1.26)	2.69	(1.38)	-.28 (98)**
Public access programs are:					
Informational	4.56	(0.96)	3.96	(1.06)	.26 (99)**
Community centered	4.44	(0.86)	3.08	(1.13)	.51 (100)***
Talkative	4.15	(1.06)	3.48	(1.19)	.31 (98)***
For others to view	4.12	(1.24)	3.54	(0.81)	.27 (99)**
Variety	4.06	(1.22)	3.62	(1.17)	.17 (95)*
Self-serving	4.06	(1.35)	3.16	(0.94)	.33 (98)***
Creative	3.88	(1.26)	3.58	(1.24)	.11 (98)
Controversial	3.82	(1.22)	3.00	(1.06)	.30 (100)***
The Arts	3.74	(1.40)	3.12	(1.67)	.29 (99)**
Entertaining	3.61	(1.17)	3.42	(1.10)	.09 (97)
Politics	3.47	(1.24)	2.81	(1.82)	.24 (100)**
Simple	3.15	(1.46)	2.65	(0.85)	.18 (99)*
Censored	2.85	(1.54)	2.80	(0.87)	.08 (98)
Dull	2.70	(1.26)	2.88	(0.99)	-.10 (99)
Flashy	1.97	(1.17)	2.65	(0.85)	-.26 (100)**
A waste of time	1.84	(1.42)	2.08	(1.09)	.10 (96)
Seen by almost everyone	1.82	(1.14)	2.12	(1.23)	-.09 (100)
Only watched by the program producers	1.61	(1.14)	2.38	(0.98)	-.28 (99)**
Obscene	1.38	(0.92)	2.00	(1.98)	-.28 (100)**
The production of public access programs is:					
A good way to share ideas	4.70	(0.64)	3.64	(1.11)	.47 (98)***
A team effort	4.49	(0.94)	3.76	(0.88)	.30 (98)***
Fun	3.91	(1.13)	3.60	(0.87)	.14 (98)*
A good way to make friends	3.30	(1.51)	2.75	(1.23)	.17 (97)*
A lot of work	3.24	(1.54)	3.40	(1.08)	-.08 (97)

An individual effort	3.18 (1.55)	3.12 (1.05)	.01 (98)
Too difficult to do	1.82 (1.13)	2.54 (0.98)	-.27 (96)**
Those who produce public access programs are:			
Civic groups	4.33 (0.85)	3.25 (1.03)	.33 (97)***
School groups	4.30 (0.95)	3.08 (0.88)	.41 (97)***
People interested in art or culture	4.06 (1.25)	3.71 (1.04)	.16 (97)
Leaders	4.06 (1.27)	3.58 (0.83)	.15 (97)
Artists	4.00 (1.06)	3.21 (1.22)	.32 (97)***
Common people	3.97 (1.21)	2.58 (1.14)	.46 (97)***
Church Groups	3.79 (1.27)	2.63 (1.06)	.34 (97)***
People interested in politics	3.76 (1.30)	3.13 (1.23)	.18 (97)*
Trained in the use of it	3.67 (1.29)	3.54 (0.98)	.05 (97)
Activists	3.52 (1.52)	3.13 (1.19)	.06 (97)
Individuals	3.48 (1.40)	3.13 (1.19)	.13 (97)

Note. Responses range from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).
 Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001